

[Extract]
GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION
August 1976

*Sorensen, The odorous
Society 2 Watchmen of
the Night: Presidential
Accountability AFTER
Watergate*

Max Beloff: Corrupting the Constitution

Theodore C. Sorensen: Watchmen of the Night: Presidential
Accountability after Watergate. Cambridge, Mass. and London,
MIT Press, 1975

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and badly executed but it was not as immoral in essence as the conventional wisdom now has it. But what Mr Sorensen suggests is not merely measures that might prevent further American armed interventions in post-colonial situations on the periphery of the communist world. They would be more far-reaching than that.

His great remedy is the ending of excessive secrecy. While he admits that the conduct of foreign relations requires some secrecy of negotiation, much that goes into it could in Mr Sorensen's view be made public: 'I would not, for example', he writes 'have subjected to public debate President Kennedy's advance discussions on what response he should make to the Russian missiles in Cuba or his exchange of messages with Nikita Khrushchev on that subject. But I would have willingly sent to Congress the conflicting reports he received on Vietnam and the conflicting studies on what should be done about it. How I wish we had!' Yet it is hard to see what added wisdom Congress could have brought to the affair.

Mr Sorensen also joins in the fashionable pastime of attacking the CIA and suggesting various restrictions on its activities and various forms of control over them which for all his disclaimers might well have the effect of making it harder to defend the security of the United States. He wants a 'blue-ribbon commission' to examine all clandestine operations 'in the light of progress towards détente, developments in international and constitutional law, the new technology of intelligence collection and analysis, and the demonstrated ineffectiveness of any foreign operations, overt or covert, which are not backed by a broad national consensus'. While the last of these things is true, as events have shown, of overt actions that may endanger American lives, covert activities of an intelligence kind belong to that part of the state's activities which cannot be subjected to any control but the integrity of its rulers. Satellite surveillance may make some forms of espionage less necessary; but as the current discussions on Salt II show, they too have their limitations. International and constitutional law are about equally irrelevant to the subject. But the key word is of course 'détente'. It seems that Mr Sorensen, sceptical of everything about Nixon, is ready to make an exception for his dealings with the Russians and the Chinese. Yet as Helsinki has shown, there has been no change in the Soviet attitude of a kind to suggest that this is a moment to lower the defences of the West. Open government at these extremes belongs to a better and safer world; when one hears it advocated unilaterally to this extent, one is tempted to use the old French reply to advocates of abolishing the death penalty: 'que messieurs les assassins commencent'.